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Sacred Turf: The Wimbledon Tennis Championships and the Changing Politics of Englishness

By Stephen Wagg (Leeds Beckett University, UK)

This essay is about 'Wimbledon', a virtually universal shorthand term for the tennis championships staged annually by the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club in south west London. It looks historically and politically at the championships, treating them as a case study in invented – or, at least, consciously nurtured and carefully modulated – tradition. To do so it draws on recent histories of tennis and on biographies of those involved in the enacting of various 'Wimbledons' and/or in the maintenance of the widely invoked aura that continues to surround the tournament. This aura is usually reduced to the single word 'tradition' but inherent in this tradition are inescapable signifiers of a kind of Englishness. This specific Englishness is largely of the same variety that has characterised the British royal family, who have been closely associated with 'Wimbledon' for much of the last one hundred years and whose own history in many ways parallels that of the championships themselves. The essay therefore also borrows from arguments both about the invention of tradition and the making of Englishness. Moreover, it discusses Wimbledon alongside the monarchy and the City of London as metaphors for England and, more generally, Britain's changing political and economic place in the world after 1945.

Origins: Behind Those Solid 'Forsyte' Homes

Lawn tennis was formalised and patented in the mid-1870s by Walter Clopton Wingfield, a Welsh army officer. (Similar racquet games were being developed around then). Initially (and improbably) it was called 'sphairistike', from the Greek word meaning skill at playing ball. Its roots lay in the racquets games of the sixteenth century and in the leisure pursuits of the European upper and upper middle classes: a notable close relative was real tennis, a centuries-old indoor racquet-and-ball game played by kings and princes. Lawn tennis soon became established on what Max Robertson refers to the '...spacious lawns behind those solid "Forsyte" homes...' - a reference to *The Forsyte Saga*, a series of novels by John Galsworthy about upper middle class life, published between 1906 and 1921

(Robertson, 1981: 17). Working class people of the late nineteenth century, it need hardly be added, didn't have lawns; indeed many still do not. Besides which, lawn tennis in Britain has always carried with it a sense of social exclusiveness – manifested mainly in the membership and manners of the local tennis clubs; this social exclusiveness, which in Wimbledon's case now operates chiefly at the level of myth¹, long ago became the championship's most saleable asset. Tennis in Britain has never been a working class sport and, although it holds what is in essence the 'British Open' (a 'Grand Slam', alongside the US, French and Australian opens²) Wimbledon remains a private club. As the historian Richard Holt pithily observed, the tennis clubs which sprang up in the English suburbs during the late nineteenth century were often surrounded by trees: 'The shelter afforded was not so much from the sun as from the intrusive gaze of the common herd' (Holt, 1992: 126).

The All England Club (AEC) was founded in 1868 in this affluent south west London suburb, initially for well-to-do people who wished to play croquet, another emergent lawn sport for ladies and gentlemen of the upper middle classes. In 1877, little more than two years after the game's codification, the Club was re-titled 'The All England Croquet and Lawn Tennis Club'. Tennis championships were inaugurated the same year by *The Field* magazine, a journal dedicated to upper class pastimes. It is believed that the motive for arranging this first singles competition was to raise money to buy a pony roller for the courts (Gorringe, 2010: 195). Competition was confined initially to men.

The words 'All England' in Wimbledon's title have always been something of a misnomer, but this was especially the case during the early decades of the Wimbledon championships. Male members had invariably attended a leading public school and/or Oxford or Cambridge University. In the first singles final Old Harrovian Spencer Gore beat Cambridge blue William C. Marshall; the Renshaw

¹ The word 'myth' is used here in the sense popularised by Roland Barthes – i.e. as 'depoliticised speech' (See Barthes, 1976: 142-5). Tennis discourse invariably now renders Wimbledon as representing 'tradition' – a designation that usually passes without further comment.

² The US Open was established in 1881 and Australian in 1905. The French Open, although, inaugurated in 1891, was not recognised as a 'Grand Slam' until 1925.

brothers, William and Ernest, who dominated the tournament in the 1880s, were men of independent means and had a court built at a hotel in the south of France at their own expense so that they could practise in the winter³; R.F. and Laurence Doherty, who were similarly prominent Wimbledon competitors around the turn of the twentieth century, had been educated at Westminster School and Cambridge; and so on. Female players, admitted to competition for the first time in 1884, were drawn from the same social milieu. The first finalists, Maud and Lilian Watson, were vicar's daughters from north London; the father of Blanche Bingley, six times singles champion between 1886 and 1900, ran a successful tailoring business in central London; Charlotte Cooper (five singles' titles between 1895 and 1908) and Dorothea Lambert Chambers (nee Douglass), who dominated women's Wimbledon between 1903 and 1914 (seven singles titles, four times runner-up) were both from wealthy west London families; and the father of five-times champion Lottie Dod, who first won the women's singles in 1887, aged 15, had made a fortune in the cotton trade in Liverpool. All these women played their tennis within the restrictions prescribed by the proprietary upper middle class males who ran Wimbledon and the other tennis clubs. Women of this class were, after all, still in the throes of campaigning for access to sports and physical exercise and the early female competitors at Wimbledon spent much of their time stranded on the baseline attired in floor length dresses, petticoats, boots, bodices and straw hats secured by hat pins.

At Wimbledon in these early decades both male and female players became the bearers of class myths which were propounded and guarded by the club hierarchy and which together constituted a kind of Englishness.⁴ This hierarchy, like the club's membership, was drawn from the higher, but arguably least progressive, echelons of British society, being linked variously to the Royal family, the British Empire and the military and attuned to reflexively conservative political discourse –

³ <http://www.geni.com/people/William-Charles-Renshaw/6000000017044957522> Access 26th March 2015

⁴ Although leading writers on the subject have identified the period 1880-1920 – in effect, the first four decades of Wimbledon – as key in the transformation of Englishness, they have made little mention of sport – see Colls and Dodd (1986) and Colls (2002). Simon Featherstone is one of comparatively few writers in this field who relate sport to Englishness. He uses the Body Line cricket tour of 1932-3 and the anti-intellectual tendencies in English football as case studies – see Featherstone, 2009: 122-39.

Wimbledon administrators had generally been officers in the armed forces and maintained their rank in civilian life. Needless to say, they were all white and perceived sport through the same lens of whiteness as their contemporary upper class males who forged the modern Olympic movement (Spracklen, 2013: 107-8). For instance, Herbert Wilberforce (Vice President 1911; President 1921-9; Chairman 1929-36) was educated at Eton and Sandhurst and became a Brigadier General in the British army. In 1887 he had won the men's doubles with Patrick Bowes Lyon, whose niece, Elizabeth, would in 1923 marry the Duke of York (later George VI). Surgeon, stockbroker and political fixer Sir Louis Greig (Chairman 1936-53) was an equerry (and tennis doubles partner) to King George VI and a member of the January Club, formed in 1934 to explore the possibility of support among the British Establishment for the British Union of Fascists (Keeley, 1995). George Hillyard (Secretary 1907-25) used the title of 'Commander' following service in the Royal Navy in the late 1870s and early 1880s. His successor, Dudley Larcombe had been in the Pay Corps in the First World war and answered to 'Major', while Duncan Macaulay (Secretary 1946-63) deployed his full title of 'Lieutenant-Colonel A.D.C. Macaulay OBE' in his memoir of 1965, sharing authorial credit with another Wimbledon stalwart, Conservative politician 'Brigadier The Rt Hon Sir John Smyth, Bt., VC, MC, MP' (Macaulay, 1965). The club has had royal patronage since 1907 when the Prince of Wales (later George V) became President and the presidency has been held by a member of the Royal family continuously since 1930.

The Englishness over which these men presided was founded, like the Olympics, principally on the evasive notion of 'amateurism'. Amateurism as an idea flourished in the period roughly between 1860 and 1960 and as I've argued elsewhere, amateurism, although it purported to define behaviour, in practice defined people (Wagg, 2006). That's to say, certain sportspeople were pre-defined as 'amateurs' and so when they performed acts that corresponded to the amateur ideal these acts were recognised as such. Acts of this kind, when performed by people not defined as amateurs, were likely to be ignored. Similarly, when those pre-defined as amateurs performed acts not commensurate with the amateur code, this was seldom acknowledged. Such acts were only,

generally speaking, recognised when performed by people already labelled as suspect – in practice, those belonging to the lower social orders. ‘Amateurism’ therefore was a vehicle for class myths and for practices of social control and exclusion (see also Wagg, 2012). The Wimbledon amateur ideal, whatever its correspondence to reality, was founded on ideas of not striving unduly for victory, the graceful acceptance of defeat, female decorum, the wearing by both genders of specified apparel and, above all, the absence of financial reward for playing the game. There would be times, of course, when Wimbledon players behaved in accordance with amateur ideology. Old Harrovian Frank Hadow, for example, showed an obvious diffidence in victory. He won the men’s singles in 1878, while on holiday from his coffee plantation in Ceylon, but didn’t trouble to return the following year to defend the trophy. Similarly Lottie Dod, the women’s singles’ champion in 1888, did not enter Wimbledon in 1889 and went sailing in Scotland instead. However, players of this period were perfectly capable of a marked competitiveness. The Renshaw brothers, after all, practised for much of the year and the AEC’s own website proclaims their invention of the overhead smash in 1870⁵. Similarly, female players were not always content to play in circumstances prescribed by the clubs male authority figures. Dod famously wrote of women on the tennis court: ‘How can they ever hope to play a sound game when their dresses impede the free movement of every limb?’ (quoted in Lake, 2014: 32. See also Gillmeister, 1999: 166-7). As Elizabeth Wilson records, Dod’s voice was one of many raised at the time in favour of ‘rational dress’ for women and indeed, the heavy and constricting garb worn by women tennis players in the late nineteenth century often drew blood from the wearer (Wilson, 2014: 35). As for the supposedly polluting effect of commercialism and the cash nexus, in 1905 the Wimbledon tournament was played with a ball that was not regulation size. At the time the secretary of the AEC was Essex player Archdale Palmer, who was also managing director of Slazenger, manufacturers of the balls (Dobbs, 1973: 168).

⁵ <http://www.tennistheme.com/wimbledontennishistory.html> Access 27th March 2015

In 1890 it was decreed that Wimbledon competitors must wear white clothing for matches. Quite why is not wholly clear. It might be that white was the colour thought most likely to conceal sweat and, thus, any suggestion of undue effort – especially on the part of females – or that white most successfully reflected the sun. Emily Chertoff recently offered the persuasive suggestion that

‘about this time, the rich in America (and England) had adopted summer white as a symbol of their leisure. Since white clothing dirties easily, it didn't recommend itself to factory workers and domestic servants in a dry-cleaning-less era of weekly baths. In fact, really the only people suited to wear white were people who didn't work at all—or who could at least afford to look like they didn't. Wearing white cost a lot. If you wore it, you signaled that you, too, cost a lot. Since tennis had long been a summer game for the rich, the rich wore white to play tennis. And—since the middle class likes to imitate the rich—as tennis democratized over the course of the 20th century, the middle class wore white to play, too’ (Chertoff, 2012).

This observation is a reminder that, as with the Olympics, the values that were held to govern lawn tennis in its early decades were not confined to Britain, nor did they necessarily originate there. But they were claimed as British and that historic claim has grown stronger even as the values themselves have gained greater redundancy.

Becoming Mecca: Imperial Wimbledon, 1900-1939

Between the turn of the twentieth century and the outbreak of the Second World War, Wimbledon, having initially been little more than the genteel playground of tennis enthusiasts among England's leisured elite, engaged increasingly with the outside world, adjusting and compromising its amateur-based Englishness as it did so.

On the face of it, however, relations of class and status at the tournament were maintained – even strengthened. The most striking feature of the event in this regard was the growing prominence of the Royal Family. George V, having, as Prince of Wales, been made president of the club in 1907, came to open the club's new premises in 1922 and, with Queen Mary, was a frequent visitor during the tournament. The Royal Box in the club's Centre Court has been a regular feature of Wimbledon

writing down the years and the club's presidency has resided with the family of the Dukes of Kent since 1935. Lt.-Colonel Macaulay's memoir was dedicated 'with kind permission to H.R.H. Princess Marina, Duchess of Kent' (Macaulay, 1965: 5). According to the historian David Cannadine, the British monarchy had, since the late nineteenth century, ceased to be 'inept, private and of limited appeal' and was now 'splendid, public and popular': it had embraced the sort of ceremonial which in other countries surrounded the head of state and, as such, constituted 'a cavalcade of impotence' (Cannadine, 2000: 120-1, 133). It was wholly in keeping with this (comparatively) new mode of operation that the Royal Family should be seen sat among their subjects enjoying some summer sport.

These subjects were attending in ever greater numbers. The first tennis competition at Worple Road in Wimbledon in 1877 had drawn 200 people, but players such as the Renshaws and the Dohertys had turned Wimbledon into a spectator sport on some scale and the club had its public to consider. It is argued, for example, that the boredom occasioned among the crowd by the long baseline rallies that characterised women's tennis led to the reduction of women's matches from five sets to three (Lake, 2014: 28). Worple Road had held 7,000 spectators; at Church Road, the club's new home from 1922, the Centre Court alone held 10,000 (Macaulay, 1965: 18) and in 1932 attendance figures topped 200,000 for the first time (Robertson, 1981: 305). In 1928 the club instituted a ballot system for the allocation of tickets, taking care to balance the interests of its members and those of the country's tennis clubs with consideration of 'the man in the street' (Macaulay, 1965: 52, 131). Wimbledon was now both a popular event and an occasion that carried royal approval: it should be open, availability permitting, to all the King's subjects.

By the end of the nineteenth century, tennis had become popular in the United States, Brazil, India, several European countries – notably in Germany and the wealthy holiday resorts of France – South America and the Middle East. By 1924 twenty different nationalities were represented in the men's singles. In the words of Sir John Smyth, Indian Army officer, Conservative M.P. and member of the

AEC's Establishment coterie, by this time Wimbledon had become lawn tennis Mecca and winning there a player's highest aspiration (Smyth, 1953: 25). As with the early modern Olympic Games, many of these players were drawn from the same social class as the club's founders and administrators, in many cases from settler families in British dominions. For example, the Australian Norman (later Sir Norman) Brookes, who became the first overseas winner of the Wimbledon singles in 1907 and who won again in 1914, was the son of the managing director of Australian Paper Mills⁶. His doubles partner Anthony Wilding, who won the singles title four years in a row (1910-13), was born in Christchurch, New Zealand to wealthy English migrant parents and studied law at Cambridge⁷. Gerald Patterson, singles winner in 1919 and 1922 was from a socially eminent family in Melbourne and a nephew of the Australian operatic soprano Dame Nellie Melba⁸. On the face of it a gentlemanly amateur Englishness was maintained and, where it was deemed necessary, lower-born tennis personnel were admitted, symbolically or otherwise, to Wimbledon's inner sanctum. John Crawford, a farmer's son from New South Wales, did not have the same elite background as Brookes, Wilding or Patterson. Recalling the victory of Crawford in the Wimbledon's singles competition of 1933, Duncan Macaulay rejoiced: 'After all, it must be remembered that no player from the British Empire had won since another Australian, Gerald Patterson, had gained the title ten years earlier' (Macaulay, 1965: 80-1). Crawford, a farmer's son, who made tennis rackets for a living, gained the approval of the Wimbledon hierarchy, not only because he came from a (white) imperial territory but because, while not from an elite family, he was known for his on-court dignity: although a biography suggests he had a competitive streak, he was given the nickname 'Gentleman Jack'⁹. Indeed, in one of the most cited incidents in Wimbledon history, Fred Perry, who beat Crawford in

⁶ See W.H. Frederick 'Brookes, Sir Norman Everard (1877–1968)' *Australian Dictionary of Biography* <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/brookes-sir-norman-everard-5373> Access: 28th March 2015

⁷ See Asher Simons 'Sporting Heroes: Anthony Wilding - Wimbledon champ died on Western Front' *The Independent* 24th January 2014 <http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/tennis/sporting-heroes-anthony-wilding-wimbledon-champ-died-on-western-front-9084382.html> Access 28th March 2015

⁸ See Virginia O'Farrell 'Patterson, Gerald Leighton (1895–1967)' *Australian Dictionary of Biography* <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/patterson-gerald-leighton-7982> Access: 28th March 2015

⁹ See Kerry Regan 'Crawford, John Herbert (Jack) (1908–1991)' *Australian Dictionary of Biography* <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/crawford-john-herbert-jack-17495> Access: 28th March 2015

the singles final of 1934, after the match overheard club committee member Brame Hillyard telling Crawford: 'Congratulations. This was one day when the best man didn't win' (Perry, 1984: 10). Perry had won in straight sets, but Hillyard's remark had not been a tennis judgment. As *New Yorker* columnist John R. Tunis wrote, Perry, 'a poor boy without a varsity background' (Fred's father had been a trade unionist and Labour MP) was not popular at Wimbledon because it was 'the most snobbish centre of sport in the world' (Perry, 1984: 78). Perry himself thought he had become a pariah in elite English tennis circles because of his self-professed will to win: 'Your opponent isn't going to look up to you if you look down on yourself, and you have to try to impose your superiority on him as forcefully as you can. Give him a beating to remember. Well, I don't think this was an approach generally favoured in England at the time. It was un-English. It wasn't done, old bean. Not in tennis, anyway.' (Perry, 1984: 78; see also Jeffreys, 2009). Fred is even thought to have expressed an ambivalence about having to bow to royalty (Robyns, 1973: 70). If true, then, for the club committee, there could have been few greater transgressions.

Perry, of course, was not the only player to raise difficulties for the sort of Edwardian façade that the AEC was trying to maintain. A number of competitors had become celebrities, both at Wimbledon and on the international tennis circuit. They had high expectations to which the old guard in SW19 were obliged to reconcile themselves. Prominent among these celebrities was the French player Suzanne Lenglen, who had made her name as a precocious teenager on the hotel courts of the French Riviera. Lenglen beat the English stalwart Dorothea Lambert Chambers in what many have seen as a watershed women's singles final of 1919 (see, for example, Hargreaves, 1994: 116). Chambers played in much of the heavy clothing that had been prescribed for female competitors hitherto. A doughty competitor, who was defending champion and had won the women's singles title seven times, she had always counselled that girls should be vigorous in learning tennis. The first line of Chapter 1 of her book *Lawn Tennis for Ladies*, first published in 1910, reads:

'I hope and believe there are comparatively few people who will deny that athletics have done much for the health and mind of the modern girl. Exercise in some form or other is essential, and although

I am quite ready to admit that games of the strenuous type, such as hockey and lawn tennis, can be and sometimes are overdone, yet the girl of to-day, who enters into and enjoys her game with scarcely less zest than her brother, is, I am convinced, better in health and happier in herself than the girl of the past generation' (Chambers, 1910)¹⁰.

Dorothea insisted that she would not have played better in shorts (Smyth, 1953: 207); Wilson, rightly, describes her as just as 'modern' as Lenglen (Wilson, 2014: 58). But Lenglen had a more conspicuous and expressive modernity. She disdained constricting clothing, sipped alcohol between games and wore makeup. She was also competitive to a degree seldom yet seen in the women's championship at Wimbledon. Patrick Clastres, a sports historian at Sorbonne University in Paris, has argued: 'Her opponents were afraid of her because she was like a lion on the court, it was not usual for a woman to hit the ball so hard.'¹¹ As Robyns observes, Lenglen had the 'alchemy of showbusiness and sport' (Robyns, 1973: 35); she represented the 'New Woman' and 'The Flapper' of the 'Jazz Age' – young, middle class women demanding greater personal freedoms – and was one of a number of a rising generation of female tennis players to wear less constricting clothing. Another was the Frenchwoman Marguerite Broquedis, whose one appearance in a Wimbledon semi-final in 1925 could not compare to Lenglen's six titles (including five in a row, 1919-1923). During this period, Lenglen, along with the American Bill Tilden and the French 'Four Musketeers', Jacques Brugnon, Jean Borotra, Henri Cochet, and René Lacoste, were the biggest stars in the firmament of international tennis. Lenglen and Tilden in particular created disquiet at Wimbledon, partly because their competitiveness – glaring, perhaps, at officials who made marginal decisions (see, for example, Lake, 2014: 141) – was a breach of the mythical Edwardian decorum that the club liked to espouse. Smyth recalled that Tilden had been 'a terror to linesmen and ball-boys and often showed off in the most outrageous manner' (Smyth, 1953: 71). But, chiefly, the emergent tennis celebrities were a problem because they confronted the central claim of Wimbledon, which was that it was still

¹⁰ The book can now be read in full on the internet at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/10961/10961-h/10961-h.htm> Access 29th March 2015

¹¹ From the CNN website: <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/06/06/sport/tennis/suzanne-lenglen-french-open-tennis/> Access 29th March 2015

founded upon historic amateur principles. Her biographer, Larry Engelmann, says of Lenglen: 'She made demands and I think people objected to that. With her talent came power, and that was a challenge to the powers that be in the tennis world at that time'.¹² Fundamental to the pattern of social exclusion initially prevailing at Wimbledon had been the notions that competitors (a) did not openly aspire to win, since their social position was not based on notions of achievement (Wimbledon people already knew what they were and why) and (b) as members of the leisured class they could afford to play for nothing. The tennis stars of the inter-war years – Lenglen, Tilden and others – met neither of these criteria. They were nominally amateurs – a condition of entry at Wimbledon – but had no apparent private income. Norah Cleather, Wimbledon secretary during the Second World War (1940-45) later felt obliged to suggest that the club had simply paid generous expenses to such figures in order to compensate them for 'longer journeys and longer absences from home' (quoted in Lake, 2014: 136). In Lenglen's case in 1926 her growing power as a celebrity collided with the status anxiety which now characterised Wimbledon and terminated her relationship, as a competitor, with the tournament. Used to being informed personally of the timing of her matches and unaware that this was no longer to be the case, Suzanne did not show up for a Centre Court tie, which Queen Mary, a great admirer of Lenglen, was waiting to watch. As Cannadine argues, the Royal Family at this time had come to rely on 'the continuing obsequiousness of the media' (Cannadine, 2000: 141) and most of the British popular press (save the *Daily Sketch*, for which Suzanne herself was contracted to write) angrily denounced this apparent snub to the King's consort (see Wagg, 2011: 133-7). Lenglen was obliged to stand while she received a reprimand from the club committee (Robyns, 1973: 43; Macaulay, 1965: 41). She later scratched from the tournament and turned professional soon after.

The anomalies of amateurism, however, were beginning to press on the minds of some Wimbledon officials. For one thing, caste-like relations between the devoutly 'amateur' club committee and

¹² Ibid. See also Engelmann, 1988.

those designated as 'professionals' were increasingly difficult to sustain. In the 1920s tennis clubs were proliferating and professional tennis coaches were in demand. A Briton hadn't won the men's singles at Wimbledon since 1909 and voices in the game were now calling for players to start young (Lake, 2010: 89-90). Much attention, for example, has been paid to the case of British tennis' most feted deferential worker, Dan Maskell, who became the first coach to be appointed at Wimbledon in 1928. Improbably, for those who heard his apparently upper middle class voice commentating on Wimbledon for the BBC, Maskell had been born into a working class home in South London and become a tennis coach at London's Queen's Club soon after leaving school in 1923. He described in awestruck tones being awarded a locker in the members' dressing room at Wimbledon, when he took up his post. Unlike Perry, Maskell never challenged the social order (he called it 'centuries of protocol') and, to him, the club's courts remained 'sacred turf' (Maskell, 1988: 71-2; 58. See also Wilson, 2014: 89-92). He coached in stately homes, where he was usually required to eat in the kitchen with the butler (Maskell, 1988: 62), and his accent betrayed no trace of his humble origins. Perry preferred America, where 'people accept you for what you are' (Perry, 1984: 109).

Some thought that the amateur-professional divide would not survive long into the 1930s. A correspondent in the London *Evening Standard* in December 1929 wrote: 'Two seasons from now, with luck, Britain will have its first Lawn Tennis Tournament open to professionals and amateurs alike' (10th December 1929. Quoted in Macaulay, 1965: 62). In 1939, the upper class organ *Country Life*, described still as the 'quintessential English magazine'¹³, called similarly for an Open Wimbledon. Lt-Cdr Macaulay, who had been secretary at the time, later wrote dismissively of the idea: 'in the amateur game there is always another champion treading on the heels of the last...' (Macaulay, 1965: 132). Not everyone accepted the loss of amateur competitors so blithely: when he turned professional in 1936 Fred Perry received an indignant message from Sir Samuel Hoare, Conservative Foreign Secretary and President of the Lawn Tennis Association, reading simply 'Why

¹³ On its own website: <http://www.countrylife.co.uk/publication/country-life> Access 29th March 2015

did you do it?' Fred immediately forfeited his honorary membership of Wimbledon – something gifted to all champions – and it was not restored until 1949 (Perry, 1984: 111). However, a qualified latitude was now shown in regard to these ex-amateur competitors. In 1938 Sir Louis Greig, who was privately in favour of an Open Wimbledon (Macaulay, 1965: 137), questioned the automatic withdrawal of membership and found the committee still adamantly against the retaining of 'pay for play' professionals as members. Nevertheless it was agreed that a now-professional Wimbledon champion should at least receive two books of tickets for the tournament (Macaulay, 1965: 131). The maintenance of an amateur intake would become more of a public issue for Wimbledon after the Second World War. As things stood, though, the tournament did not lack for funds – the AEC showed a healthy annual profit and handed its surplus over to the Lawn Tennis Association (Macaulay, 1965: 263) – and each year the demand for tickets exceeded the supply. There was little, then, to cause the club's most entrenched defenders of amateurism to reconsider their position.

Least Upset by the War: Wimbledon, America and the Tennis Market 1940-1975

In his memoir, Lt-Cdr Macaulay remarked, rather huffily, that the United States had been 'least upset by the war of all the tennis-playing nations' (Macaulay, 1965: 149). The post-war relationship between the All England Club and American tennis loosely paralleled the relationship between Britain and the United States over the same period. While British governments took huge loans from the US and resigned themselves to the dismantlement of the British Empire, American tennis players dominated the Wimbledon championships while American entrepreneurs hovered, waiting to sign the latest champions to a professional contract. America represented social forces that Wimbledon defined itself against, but, in the end, could not resist.

A central figure here was Jack Kramer, the son of a blue collar railroad worker from California, who won the Wimbledon men's singles in 1947 and turned professional the following year. After retiring as a player in 1954 he ran a pro' tour in the US and recruited for it at Wimbledon. This made him an

intermittent hate figure for the British sports press (Evans, 1988: 6; Wilson, 2014: 144) although he commentated on annual Wimbledons for B.B.C. television alongside Maskell between 1960 and 1974. While fond of the tournament, Kramer was one of the few leading tennis figures to challenge the Wimbledon mystique:

‘The fact is that Wimbledon’s pre-eminence is really rather new. We all have a tendency to assume that anything from England is older than anything from America and therefore is steeped in tradition. And it is true that lawn tennis was invented in England and that Wimbledon is older than our championship – by all of four years. But our national association started before England’s, and the Davis Cup is American. So Wimbledon has no significant seniority over the U.S. Nationals...’ (Kramer, 1979: 103).

Moreover, Kramer had won Wimbledon in shorts and a T shirt and while he became the symbol of an alternative (and more lucrative) possible future for many nominally amateur tennis players, tennis apparel – initially for females – also returned as an issue at Wimbledon. In 1949 the American Gussie Moran played Wimbledon in a short skirt designed for her by Ted Tinling, a key broker of female tennis glamour during the four decades that followed the Second World War. Tinling’s project might actually have been considered reactionary by progressively minded women since he seemed to be trying to prescribe a more ornamental role for females following their work in wartime industries. He claimed: ‘Christian Dior’s Paris “New Look” in 1947 created an international hunger for a return to femininity and sexual attraction in clothing [...] I felt that by looking like modern-day Amazons, the sportsgirls were renouncing their birthright’ (Tinling, 1983: 119). Sir Louis Greig, however, was furious with Tinling for ‘having drawn attention to the sexual area’ and Tinling left his job as player liaison at Wimbledon (Evans, 2013). Greig and the committee were also very likely concerned that the tournament was undermining its historic and carefully cultivated identity by permitting this oblique form of advertising.

Greig, however, was strongly pro-television, thinking it would boost crowds, and in 1946 he had authorised Macaulay to do a deal for extended coverage¹⁴ with the B.B.C.'s Head of Sport, future Conservative M.P. Ian Orr-Ewing; the corporation duly installed extra cameras at the club in 1952 (Macaulay, 1965: 154, 187). The inauguration of Wimbledon as a television programme (it was already popular on BBC radio) may have set in train a greater concern at the club that they should be able to feature the world's best players, along with a respectable performance by British ones. This once again called the professional-amateur divide into question, but British tennis authorities were divided on this issue, with the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) and International Lawn Tennis Federation apparently more reluctant than Wimbledon to throw the field open, although the latter voted narrowly against open tennis in 1960 (Evans, 1988: 3). In 1952, chairman of the LTA Lord Templewood (formerly Sir Samuel Hoare) declared 'The day of the amateur who played tennis at his own expense and could reach the top has gone beyond recall. If we are going to have good players in these times we must finance them. We will do this by a special fund...' (quoted in Noel, 1955: 22). The following year Sir John Smyth stated that the American public were bored watching the same players on the professional circuit and that 'amateur lawn tennis remains, as it has always been, a game of great endeavour, a game of great sportsmanship...' (Smyth, 1953: 222, 227-8). But there was increased talk in tennis circles of 'shamateurism' – a word now frequently heard in other sporting worlds, such as football and athletics, where, ostensibly, the amateur-professional distinction was maintained. The purportedly English notion that it was not winning that mattered, but taking part, was now subject to more widespread challenge. In 1954, when 13-year old Londoner Christine Truman won the *Evening News* competition at Wimbledon, Dan Maskell remarked on 'her astonishing concentration and determination to chase the ball. It was quite unreal, un-English' (quoted in Robyns, 1973: 153). Eight years later, in an angry memoir, Welsh player Mike Davies was openly at odds with this Englishness. Davies probably spoke for many when he wrote sarcastically

¹⁴ Play was televised for the first time in 1937, when matches were transmitted by the B.B.C. from Centre Court for up to half an hour each day of the championship.

‘How dreadful to see a youngster hurl his racket to the ground in an agony of frustration! How wrong for a boy to be so determined to win that defeat brought tears of anger for all to see! These sentiments of course are symptomatic of the way we British are so often brain-washed to defeat by our own people. From our earliest days we are told: “Take failure gracefully – the game’s the thing”’. He also asserted: ‘Morally, it’s better for a player to become a “shamateur” than to make a convenience of an employer in one of these phoney jobs’. Of an open Wimbledon, he said ‘It will come. Never fear.’ (Davies, 1962: 16, 48-9). Davies was soon proved right, although other factors seem to have weighed more heavily in the decision than the moral one. ‘Shamateur tennis was finished one afternoon during the Wimbledon of 1966’, recalled Kramer. Jack was asked to call into the BBC tent to meet corporation executive Bryan Cowgill and Herman David, a critic of ‘shamateurism’ and AEC chairman since 1959. The pro’ tennis circuit had claimed most of the (generally either American or Australian) Wimbledon champions of the 1950s. David told him that the AEC had finally tired of staging ‘second-class tennis’ and asked Kramer whether ‘after all these years of fighting the pros, will the public still support us?’ Kramer responded that England had just won the association football World Cup and ‘it was clear that nobody cared that the soccer heroes earned a living at their game’. Wimbledon agreed to stage a professional tournament the following year, the B.B.C. providing prize money of \$35,000, and the following year the championships went open (Kramer, 1979: 259-60).

This move affirmed Wimbledon primarily as a television show and events now followed the logic of that affirmation, the club once again tailoring its professed Englishness to new political circumstances. There were important new commercial challenges in the early 1970s. *Virginia Slims* cigarettes and *World Tennis* magazine had inaugurated a professional women’s tennis circuit in the United States in 1971. In 1972 Wimbledon banned players contracted to oil billionaire Lamar Hunt’s World Championship of Tennis (WCT) when Hunt demanded appearance money and TV fees. This meant that reigning men’s singles champion John Newcombe was unable to defend his title (see Newcombe, 2002: Ch.3). Attendances that year were nevertheless the second highest in

Wimbledon's history. However, the following year 81 members of the newly formed Association of Tennis Professionals boycotted Wimbledon in support of the Yugoslav player Nikki Pilic who was in dispute with his national association. The AEC was obliged once again to trawl the tennis world for credible 'amateurs' (Gray, 2013). Chris Gorringe, who became assistant secretary of the club that year, recalled the committee's thinking after these successive boycotts: 'The ongoing fear was what the ongoing implications might be. We thought that we could go through two, maybe three Championships of inferior quality before we would suffer. [...] [Then] people would start questioning whether to buy a ticket in advance, if there could be no guarantee of the world's top players attending. There would also be a knock-on effect for TV and commercial partners. They would be even more suspicious and hard-nosed when it came to re-negotiating contracts if they were finding that the top players were not competing' (Gorringe, 2009: 45-6). The club had meanwhile begun a marketing operation under the auspices of London's leading sports marketer Bagenal Harvey, who had negotiated with companies whose products, such as Robinson's Barley Water and Slazenger tennis balls, were inevitably seen in Wimbledon broadcasts, and who arranged for the first corporate hospitality tent to be opened at Wimbledon fortnight in 1975. It was not long, however, before Harvey gave way to US marketing magnate Mark McCormack, who had been involved with club since 1968 and whose International Management Group (IMG) were now made sole agents for Wimbledon. McCormack, said Gorringe, was a 'tougher negotiator' – 'I remember going to a Eurovision meeting in Paris, where he really tore strips off one person because they were offering what he thought was a derisory amount. It was not particularly nice to watch...' (Gorringe, 2009: 60, 69). At some point amid these transactions, a Wimbledon official expressed disquiet at this 'opening the temple to the moneychangers' (quoted in Wilson, 2014: 158). The task now for the All England Club was to maintain its timeless non-pecuniary aura nonetheless.

Packaging Englishness: Wimbledon since 1975

The marketing of Wimbledon's evasive but enduring Englishness was now accentuated, both on and off the court. In the former context, the championships soon offered up a readymade passion play.

Alan Mills, an ex-professional player who joined the Wimbledon staff in 1977, remembered:

'...since the late 1970s, a different kind of animal had come to stalk the court, and once the barriers of good conduct had been broken down, this new breed had begun to stampede into the former bastion of civilised behaviour with a terrifying lack of embarrassment or shame. The clout of the professional tennis player had been growing year on year since the advent of the Open era in 1968. With every nought added to the end of their prize money cheques came a proportionate rise in the amount of power players felt was entitled to them. As far as many of them were concerned, some of the chair umpires and line judges were just doddery old amateurs....' (Mills, 2005: 2).

Preeminent among these was New Yorker John McEnroe, who first won the Wimbledon men's singles title in 1981 at the age of 22. McEnroe's on-court behaviour recalled exactly the emotional reactions to competitive tennis that Mike Davies had described back in 1962 and there's little doubt that it privately affronted the AEC's 'old guard'; indeed in the year of this first victory McEnroe received the maximum penalty for conduct and honorary membership of the club – now routinely awarded to a champion – was withheld. (It was given McEnroe the following year.) But the AEC and their media advisors will in all probability have realised that the outbursts of McEnroe and others, above all else, constituted 'good television'. Audiences, in particular those young and/or American, will have relished the public anguish of these latter-day James Deans, particularly since they seemed to confront patrician, uptight traditional authority. As journalist Tim Adams observed 'At some point the B.B.C. , itself groping for new boundaries of public decorum, must have found that the soundtrack was generating at least as much interest as the passing shots and half-volleys and so, in the interests of, well, voyeurism, they tended to let it run' (Adams, 2003: 55). Naturally, this turn of events did not please match umpires and Bob Jenkins, who officiated at the Wimbledon men's singles final of 1982 called for stiffer punishments to be imposed on the young recalcitrants. He was marginalised and dismissed in 1985, publishing a bitter account of the affair the following year (Jenkins, 1986).

Wimbledon, needless to say, continued to evince an authority that could be railed against – in particular insisting upon sports apparel that was ‘almost entirely white’. The flamboyant American player Andre Agassi boycotted Wimbledon for three summers from 1988 and in 1990 a Wimbledon chairman John Curry visited him in Paris and urged him to come back. When he did so Agassi said that he’d been wrong to stay away and that Wimbledon was ‘special’ (Philip, 1993: 2-3).

Reconciliation with the *enfants terrible* of the past is another important element in the Wimbledon narrative of the last thirty years: as in Oliver Goldsmith’s poem, ‘they came to scoff and remained to pray’¹⁵.

Wimbledon meanwhile moved to boost its commercial operation, offering corporate hospitality themed, according to Gorringer, as ‘tennis in an English garden’ (Gorringer, 2009: 129). The AEC recruited a marketing director in 1985, a TV marketing director in 1989 and an IT director in 1995. Astutely, it has opted for a merchandising strategy and allows no advertising, beyond logos incidental to the tennis such as the label on a bottle of Lemon Barley water, within its precincts. The club’s website states: ‘One of the Club’s key objectives is to enhance the unique character and image of The Championships by keeping our courts and grounds relatively free of commercial sponsorship and product placement, hence the lack of overt advertising around the Grounds’. This, they explain, protects the ‘Wimbledon brand’; they warn against any attempt at ‘ambush marketing’.¹⁶ The AEC now has shops selling Wimbledon merchandise on site and in India and China (Gorringer, 2009: 165).

Thus, like the Royal Family, who are similarly held to stand above politics and the market, but have nevertheless installed gift shops at their various palaces, Wimbledon markets what has always purported to be above commerce. Invoking ‘tradition’, the AEC maintains exclusivity, while taking credit for its abolition. The trick, of course, is that the precise nature of that exclusivity has changed, with the many hospitality bars and tents now thronging with forgiven ex-professionals and corporate

¹⁵ From Oliver Goldsmith’s poem of 1770, ‘The Deserted Village’.

¹⁶ http://www.wimbledon.com/en_GB/visitor_a_to_z/201205141337004580049.html Access 31st March 2015.

guests and the Royal Box featuring a greater number of celebrities – symbols of achieved, rather than inherited wealth: restrictions were placed on the number of seats allocated to the Duchess of Kent in 1999 (Ezard, 1999). The practice of players bowing or curtsying to the Royal Box (save for the Queen or the Duke of Edinburgh) was discontinued in 2003.

In the ten years to 2005 Wimbledon paid £292 million to the Lawn Tennis Association. But, despite the success of the Scot Andy Murray, who won the Wimbledon men's singles title in 2013, British players have made comparatively little impression on the competition in recent decades (Virginia Wade's victory in the women's singles of 1977 notwithstanding) and have largely retained the 'gallant loser' status decried by Fred Perry and Mike Davies. Elite tennis players now tend to have been schooled in tennis ranches, camps and academies, such as the one run by Nick Bollettieri in Miami, bought by IMG in 2001. Wimbledon, therefore, has become simply an important cog in a vertically integrated system of tennis production, in which the same companies produce and market the players and the tournaments in which they play. Analogously to the City of London, Wimbledon now principally services foreign tennis capital. Tennis has never become a mass participation sport in Britain and LTA priority has been given to the search for an elite performer who could compete on the international circuit – a search realised in the form of Murray, who turned professional in 2005. Some blame the LTA for the lack of a substantial British tennis presence at Wimbledon but Bollettieri argued forcefully in 2010:

'Sure, you stage the most prestigious event in the world – Wimbledon. But your national sports are soccer and cricket, and your Olympic resources go to cycling, rowing, sailing, swimming, all sports at which you excel at or are improving in. Tennis is part of a social scene. So to argue that Roger Draper, the chief executive of the LTA, is responsible for British tennis's ills is to misidentify the problem. If you'd had generations of Grand Slam winners (like the Australian men from the mid 1940s to the early 1970s, or us Americans for many decades) and then they'd disappeared, then seek blame. But those generations of British tennis winners never existed, not this side of the black-and-white movie era' (Bollettieri, 2010).

Wimbledon, in other words, could not have it both ways. It represented, and traded heavily upon a socially exclusive tennis-Englishness; it couldn't, at the same time, presume upon a massed nation

thronging the public tennis courts. Interestingly, and ironically, the main current initiative to promote tennis as a mass participation sport is being conducted by a comedian – Tony Hawkes, founder of the charity Tennis for Free¹⁷ (see Briggs, 2012). Indeed, Murray is hard in some ways to square with the Englishness so assiduously marketed by Wimbledon. For one thing, he is a Scot who has often been pressed by the English media to affirm his Britishness – especially at the time of the referendum on independence for Scotland in 2014 (see, for example, Mitchell, 2014). For another he has publically renounced the ethic that Wimbledon – admittedly largely for marketing purposes - still flaunts. On the first page of his memoirs, Chris Gorringer quotes with pride the lines from Rudyard Kipling – ‘If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster/ And treat those two imposters just the same’ – which are ‘boldly displayed in the All England Clubhouse’ (Gorringer, 2009: 3). On Page 1 of his autobiography, Murray retorts: ‘Kipling’s wrong, by the way. You can’t treat them exactly the same, Triumph and Disaster. I don’t. Triumph is clearly better. I have never liked losing’ (Murray, 2009: 1).

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